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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this guide is to help practitioners learn about the at-risk student and dropout problem, and to suggest strategies which increase the chances that those who are at risk of dropping out of school will complete formal education programs. The guide begins with a brief discussion of the extent of the problem and of the social and economic costs associated with people who enter adulthood without the advantage of a high school diploma. National trends as well as Texas statistics are presented. Next, the guide discusses the various characteristics which are associated with and can be used to help identify youth who have dropped out or who are likely to drop out of school. Accompanying each characteristic is a discussion of one or more strategies which have been reported to be effective in dropout prevention and recovery. Some of the topics covered include: (1) academic performance concerns and strategies to enhance academic achievement; (2) teacher involvement and local control; (3) program size; (4) tutoring and mentoring; (5) motivation and school climate concerns, as well as strategies to alter school climate and build student motivation; (6) alternative schools; (7) overage and developmental concerns; (8) strategies to promote parental involvement; (9) cultural differences; (10) language proficiency concerns; (11) self-esteem and social interaction concerns; and (12) strategies to help students who are pregnant, married, or who are parents. (ABL)

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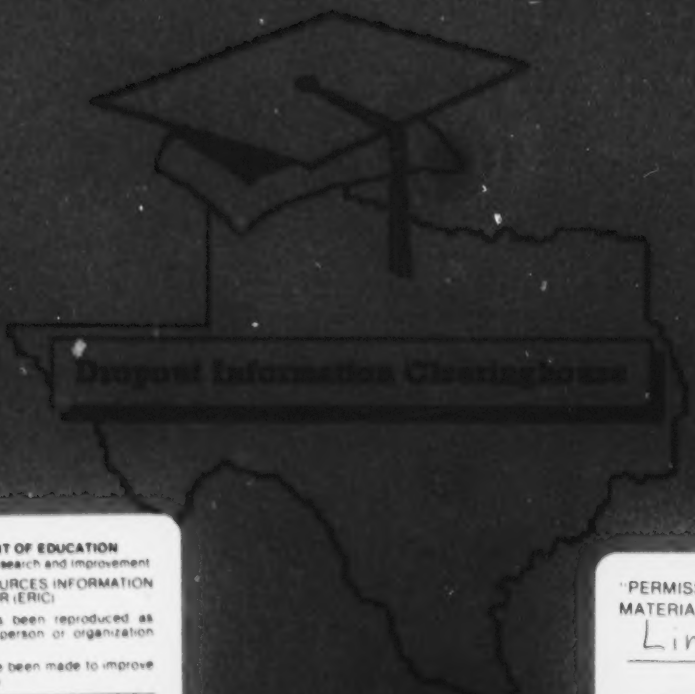
PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE SERIES
NUMBER ONE:

Characteristics of At-Risk Youth



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Characteristics of At-Risk Youth
Practitioner's Guide Series Number One

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PREFACE

This document is the first in a series of **Practitioners' Guides to Dropout Prevention**, developed by private consultants who are experts in the field, under contract with the Texas Dropout Information Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse, which is part of the Texas Education Agency Division of Program Planning, was established by House Bill 1010 to create an information forum for service providers who are working together to prevent students from dropping out and to recover those who do.

The purpose of this guide, **Characteristics of At-Risk Youth**, is to provide a summary of the research on characteristics of at-risk students and dropouts as well as information on successful programs and strategies for these individuals. This material is presented to inform practitioners of the literature in this area, rather than to mandate local policy and programs. As stressed in the guide, effective dropout reduction programs are designed to solve specific problems and to address the needs of particular at-risk and dropout populations. Individualized assistance to meet the unique requirements of each at-risk student and dropout can only be developed and implemented at the local level. For further information or assistance, please contact the Texas Education Agency Dropout Information Clearinghouse, NHP Building, 1609 Shoal Creek, Suite 200, Austin, Texas, 78701, (512) 463-9633.

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"In the 1985-86 school year alone, the most recent for which reliable figures are available, 682,000 American teenagers dropped out of school -- an average of 3,789 each day. In urban school districts from Boston to Los Angeles to Honolulu, up to half of all students entering the ninth grade fail to graduate four years later. Moreover, the dropout problem may loom still larger in the future."

(Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu, 1987, p. 15)

"Texas ranks 42nd in the percentage of youth who graduate from high school. Of 233,857 ninth graders in Texas in 1980, only 69 percent graduated from high school."

(Hodgkinson, 1986, p. 3)

INTRODUCTION

Overview and Purpose of this Document

The question of how to reduce the dropout rate of Texas' schoolchildren has received attention for some time. With a new emphasis on educational reform and recent awareness of the tremendous social and economic costs incurred by those who drop out of school, educators, and other service providers are being directed to solve the problem now. In order to assist educators and other local service providers, the Texas Education Agency asked experts in the field to put together this "user-friendly" guide for practitioners. The guide is developed to help practitioners learn about the at-risk student and dropout problem, and to effect strategies which increase the chances that those who are at risk of dropping out of school will complete formal educational programs.

This guide is designed to provide practitioners with an easy-to-read distillation of findings from the literature concerning at-risk students and dropouts. It begins with a brief discussion of the extent of the problem and of the social and economic costs associated with people who enter adulthood without the advantage of a high school diploma. Next, it includes a discussion of the various characteristics which are associated with and can be used to help identify youth who have dropped out or who are likely to drop out of school. Accompanying each characteristic is a discussion of one or more strategies which have been reported to be effective in dropout prevention and recovery.

The literature suggests that effective dropout prevention and recovery programs are designed to solve specific problems; they are not designed to deal with at-risk youth in general. That is, the literature strongly urges that programs be designed to apply to at-risk youth with particular characteristics. Practitioners, then, need to identify the characteristics of the at-risk students and dropouts for whom they are responsible before designing and implementing programs to help keep them in school. In order to identify these characteristics, practitioners need to be able to easily ascertain which strategies have been found to be effective with at-risk youth who exhibit specific characteristics. Therefore, in this document particular strategies have been juxtaposed with particular at-risk student and dropout characteristics.

There are three major problems to be solved before practitioners can say that they have been able to work effectively with at-risk youth:

First, there is a problem of definitions. There is no universally accepted operational definition of "at-risk youth" or what constitutes a "dropout." It seems obvious that practitioners who want to help identify at-risk students and reduce dropout rates will need to clarify the target of their efforts before doing anything else. This problem and its scope, as well as its economic and social costs, are discussed in the first section of this document.

Second, characteristics identifying those students at risk of dropping out need to be clearly understood, and systematic attempts need to be undertaken to monitor youth who exhibit these characteristics. This is the most clearly documented and most easily understood problem of the three. Most of what is known about the characteristics of at-risk youth comes from studying those who have already dropped out of school. Examining their longitudinal records (attendance, discipline, achievement), interviewing or surveying them, and examining demographic information (family and personal characteristics) are typical techniques. A great deal is already known about students who have dropped out of school. And, by inference, much is known about the at-risk population. But determining which student will become a school's next dropout is not a simple task. The problems which culminate in a student's decision to leave school as a sixteen year-old

often have their roots formed when that individual is very young -- perhaps even before he or she enters school. Also, there are many characteristics which can be used to help identify students who are likely to drop out of school; but most, if not all, students who drop out exhibit several of these characteristics. This means that educators can identify students who are at risk, but they can not be sure which individual will be the next "casualty."

Third, there is general agreement about, and a solid body of literature which discusses guidelines that can be used by practitioners to design and implement programs which help keep at-risk youth in school. But very little information exists which can empirically and objectively demonstrate that these guidelines actually reduce the dropout rates of at-risk students. Therefore, guidelines which appear to be consensual rather than empirical have been included. For the purposes of this document and to help practitioners initiate new programs, the assumption was made that those who work with at-risk youth and who report "what works," can and need to be trusted in the absence of more substantial research data.

Finally, the guidelines discussed in this document are no more than an essential component of the blueprint for quality education for all children. The imperative to implement these guidelines is driven by the high cost to the individual student and to society which accompanies each dropout. Practitioners can use this imperative to dramatically improve their service delivery systems. If exemplary dropout prevention and recovery programs can be established, then we've purchased the ticket to enable us to deliver the same quality programs and care for all of our youth regardless of how "at-risk" they might be.

WHY THE IMPERATIVE TO IDENTIFY AT-RISK STUDENTS AND WORK TOWARDS DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY?

Educational Reform

Levin (1987, p. 19) has stated, "Although the rhetoric of recent state reform stresses improvement of education for all children, the substance of the reforms does not support it. The reform movement systematically neglects educationally disadvantaged students." Practitioners have begun to see the reaction from many sectors of the educational community to the recent national academic reform movement's emphasis on higher standards (Barber and McClellan, 1987, Conrath, 1986, Green and Baker, 1986). Although this debate has spawned various research efforts, some educators report that no decisive data exist, leaving us "armed primarily with ideological perspectives but few data" (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 36).

In an attempt to discover the status of the one million at-risk children in the public schools across the nation and to discern the intent of the educational excellence commissions, researchers have undertaken a thorough analysis of the reports issued by numerous reform movement advocates (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1985; National Coalition of Advocates, 1983). These analyses yield the following trends:

- The state of public education for at-risk students was found to be sorely lacking, and they were in even greater jeopardy of dropping out in light of the recent education reform movement's emphasis on higher standards.
- Only fifteen commissions had even one recommendation aimed at a group of students that could be described as at-risk.
- In four of the commission reports, dropouts either received no mention or were treated superficially.

It can be argued in light of these findings that if the recommendations developed within these reports are incorporated, states may be designing blueprints for failure for at-risk students. Longitudinal studies are needed to provide practitioners with substantive data which will either prove or disprove the soundness of the recommendations included in the excellence reports. If the problem is increased rather than ameliorated, effective support strategies need to be developed to catch those students who may increasingly fall through the cracks in the educational system.

It is the responsibility of educational researchers and practitioners to systematically collect the data needed for purpose of analysis, extract meaningful relationships, and use them to direct the development of program models.

Demographic Changes

The demographic composition of the school-age population in the United States is undergoing dramatic changes. A sequence of significant trends will profoundly impact the nation's future pool of students. Review of the literature reveals the following trends:

- The number of economically disadvantaged ethnic and racial minority youth will increase, because of the higher birthrates of these populations. This trend will result in a group of children who will be increasingly poorer as well as more ethnically and linguistically diverse. The current enrollment of disadvantaged students (30 percent) far exceeds that of the 1960's (Boyer, 1987, p. 5; Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu, 1987, p. 17; Levin, 1987, p. 19).

- 53 percent of all upper and middle-income families place their preschool children in special programs, as compared to 29 percent of all families with at-risk three- and four-year olds (Boyer, 1987, p. 6). This means that many children from disadvantaged homes enter school only to find themselves unable to match the basic educational and social skills that their peers have already acquired.

- The country's entry-level labor pool - 14-24 year olds - is shrinking (Rhodes, 1987, p. 3).

- The U.S. Department of Labor projects that, by 1995, one-third of all jobs will be scientific, managerial, or professional. In the next decade, 50 percent of these jobs will require the same level of education previously associated with college-bound students (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 35).

- In 1950, 17 workers backed each retiree's Social Security check. By 1992, only three workers will back each Social Security check (Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu, 1987, p. 17; Hodgkinson, 1986 p. 5).

- The rapid introduction of new technologies and the continuing shift of employment away from manufacturing and towards services will have a profound and irreversible impact on the type of work that today's students will encounter when they enter the job market, and on the skills they will need in order to obtain and succeed in productive employment. It is likely that, as computers and robotics become increasingly pervasive production tools, the number of manufacturing jobs will be reduced (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 2).

It is obvious that unless service providers proactively respond to these changes, society will fail to produce individuals capable of functioning effectively within an increasingly complex and economically striated society.

Social Impact

U.S. Senator Arlen Specter, in response to a question concerning the impact of the dropout problem, stated, "Job prospects for dropouts are worse than bleak. Dropouts who are fortunate find their way into dead-end jobs. The unfortunate ones find their way into prison" (National School Safety Center, 1986, p. 4). Research supports his contention that 95 percent of all felons have not finished high school (Duhon and Mouton, 1985, p. 9). And, according to Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu (1987), dropouts confront a variety of other challenges. Their unemployment rate is double that of high school graduates. They are also less satisfied with their personal lives and tend to have poorer health.

In combination, these data present a rather bleak picture for those who drop out of our educational system. A rich pool of resources is being lost, mostly to the welfare and prison systems. Duhon and Mouton (1985) estimate that 90 percent of all able-bodied people on welfare today are the high school dropouts of yesterday. These young people become economically, as well as socially,

disenfranchised from virtually all institutions within society. They function as social isolates, powerless because of a lack of resources. They may have little positive regard for themselves and often seek solace by engaging in activities which prove to be abusive to themselves or others.

In the case of teen pregnancy, the action of dropping out of school proves harmful to both the parents and their offspring. Teen pregnancy is a major contributor to the nation's high dropout rate. It is estimated that each year, 1.2 million American teenagers become pregnant, and 500,000 of these women give birth. Research indicates that the social and economic costs of teenage pregnancy are enormous.

The social costs associated with all aspects of the dropout problem are additionally compounded by the economic costs, which are just as devastating to the individual and to society.

Economic Impact

Numerous projections and estimates exist which present the economic impact of dropouts on society. As with other areas of research on this topic, the number of variables which must be considered in the design of statistical models is so complex that it presents an almost insurmountable challenge. It is with this caveat that these data are presented. It is fair to say that there exists a controversy among those who are interested in examining the economic impact of the dropout problem. The debate centers around return-on-investment: simply stated, do the benefits outweigh the costs for dropout recovery? Those advocating investment in dropout intervention argue that:

- Dropouts become heads of households thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and lost revenues.
- Society provides approximately $16 billion to support the first-born infants of teenagers.
- It costs four times as much to jail a child as it costs to educate him or her.
- The government spends approximately $2500/year in ADA costs to keep a student in school; it spends approximately $28,000/year to keep a prisoner incarcerated.
- Dropouts are estimated to earn $441,000 less during their lives than high school graduates. This is estimated to cost the nation $237 billion over the lifetime of these men and women.
- Nationally, the estimated costs of dropping out prior to high school graduation are $3 billion a year and this cost is rising.
- The estimated costs of welfare programs to the nation are $3 billion a year and rising.
- Foregone government revenues due to dropouts are estimated at $71 billion.
- Businesses spent $40 million in 1985 to teach remedial reading, writing, and mathematics, and to create innovative programs to retain students in school. American citizens lose billions to the dropout problem in terms of decreased personal income, decreased government revenue, and increased welfare payments.

- The economic costs to the nation of the dropout problem in foregone earnings and higher utilization of social services such as welfare and unemployment compensation, far exceed those of providing effective educational programs.

THE SCOPE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM: NATIONAL TRENDS

In examining the scope of the dropout problem, a number of issues are worthy of note. In this section, several national trends are presented in an attempt to provide a broad review of the topic area.

Types and Status of Statistical Data

For several reasons, reliable and valid dropout data are difficult to obtain. First, operational definitions of the term "dropout" vary radically. Second, data collection methodologies for calculating dropout statistics yield dramatically different results. The third problem with dropout data concerns the way in which these estimates are used. For these reasons, it is important to cautiously interpret currently available data sources, and carefully consider the research procedures utilized to develop them.

Dropout data are generated from two principal sources: household surveys (census data) and school-based information sources. When household surveys are used, information is usually gathered using sampling strategies and the results are statistically weighted in order to generalize to the population of interest. School-based estimates are calculated based upon either the difference between enrollment and graduation; that is, attrition, or on school district studies of those who leave school (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 29).

Research indicates a vast difference between the estimates generated from these two sources. A California State Department of Education report (1986) presents dropout statistics from a variety of sources which vividly illustrate the lack of consistent, reliable data. However, from the literature reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education, these patterns emerged:

- Attrition calculations tend to produce the highest dropout estimates.
- Household surveys tend to produce dropout estimates which are low.
- District dropout studies tend to produce numbers which are lower than corresponding attrition studies.
- There appears to be no substantive difference in procedures and outcomes (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 26).

As a result of his research, Hahn (1987, p. 257) reported that, "among the thousands of school districts in the U.S., it sometimes seems that no two count dropouts in the same way. Their statistics are not always accurate, and their methods of calculating the dropout rate vary from year to year and from school to school."

Illiteracy

Illiteracy rates are directly related to dropout rates. Some researchers argue that the dropout rate is increasing; if this is so, we can expect a correlational increase in the number of functional illiterates. Research conducted by the National Commission on Excellence (1983) found that at

least twenty-three million adult Americans "can be characterized as functionally illiterate by the simplest test of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension." The report also states that "with the number of illiterates increasing at 2.3 million per year, educators and legislators are diverting millions of dollars to seek problematic solutions to this devastating national disaster" (Henry, 1986, p. 5).

History

Longitudinal analysis of the dropout rate over the last twenty years reveals some interesting figures. A sampling of research opinion is also included for review. Weidman states that there has been, "a decrease in the relative number of dropouts in the population over the past 20 years." His assertion is supported by Hahn who comments, "dropout rates for the country as a whole are not growing worse. The public has been led to believe proclamations of record high dropout figures. Actually, in the 1960's the proportion of dropouts in the 16-24 year old age group stood at about 20 percent. Since then, the rate has declined to somewhere between 13 percent and 14 percent." He further adds that among Black youth the rate fell from 21 percent in 1974 to 15 percent in October, 1985 (Hahn, 1987, p. 257). In reviewing this data, it is important to remember the changes in the demands of the labor market for higher educational and skills attainment. These shifts will result in fewer employment possibilities for dropouts. Therefore, although the number of dropouts may decrease in the future, the economic havoc produced by this group of individuals may actually increase.

With the dropout rate approaching 50 percent in some large American cities, the dropout problem is in reality a major educational, social, and economic issue ("High School Dropouts," a 1981 National Public Radio series; Hedman, 1985, p. 4). In order to determine the actual prevalence of the problem, a number of researchers have undertaken a variety of studies, each utilizing diverse methodologies. Review of the literature indicates that dropout statistics can be categorized and cited in a number of different ways. The following variables seem to receive the most attention:

(1) **City**: Although the national dropout rate is estimated to be at 25 percent, in New York City, (1984) the rate is calculated to be at 40 percent, in Los Angeles at 55 percent and in Miami at 50 percent (Green and Baker, 1986, p. 2). Boyer (1987) indicates that in some city high schools on any given day at least four out of ten students are absent. In Philadelphia the dropout rate is estimated to be at 38 percent, in Boston at 43 percent, and in Chicago over 50 percent, of which only a third were reading at the twelfth grade level, (Boyer, 1987, p. 4; Hahn, 1987, p. 257). Dropout rates in large cities have been found to be twice as high as those in the smaller cities (25 percent as opposed to 13 percent).

(2) **Gender**: The U.S. General Accounting Office reported that in 1985 the number of male dropouts outnumbered female dropouts (16 percent to 12 percent). Other researchers note little or no appreciable difference in the dropout rate between the two genders (Hahn, 1987, p. 257; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1986, p. 6; Weidman, 1984, p. 26).

(3) **Grade**: Ekstrom (1986) estimates the following dropout rates by grade level: sophomore year, 30 percent; junior year, 44 percent; and senior year, 26 percent. Rhodes (1987) estimates a dropout rate of 25 percent for the 8th grade.

(4) **Ethnicity**: Dropout estimates for Native American, Hispanic, and Black youth range from 36-85 percent. (Rhodes, 1987, p. 3). The U.S. General Accounting Office reports that of the 4.3 million dropouts in 1985, 3.5 million are Anglo, 700,000 are Black and 100,000 are from other groups (Hahn, 1987, p. 257). Boyer, in examining dropout rates for Hispanic and Puerto Rican students, found that almost 50 percent drop out before graduation (Boyer, 1987,

p. 4). A recent study conducted by the Chicago Board of Education found the city's dropout rate to be 50.7 percent. Disaggregated by ethnicity, the study found a consistently high rate among all students: 38 percent for Anglos, 56 percent for Blacks and 57 percent for Hispanics (Hahn, 1987, p. 257). Levin references a 1976 government study, which found that while 13 percent of all 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate, among Hispanics the percentage was 56 percent and among Blacks it was 44 percent (1987, p. 19).

(5) **State**: States in the Northwest United States experience the lowest dropout rate, nine percent. States in the Northeast and the Southeast come in next at 11 percent and eighteen percent respectively. The Southwest suffers from the highest dropout rate at 21 percent (Hahn, 1987, p. 258). In Texas, the dropout rate is 33 percent (Hodgkinson, 1986, p. 3).

(6) **Educational Level of Parents**: Research indicates an inverse relationship between education of family head and the number of school dropouts. A study completed in 1979 found that among dropouts, 61 percent of the Anglos and 77 percent of the Blacks were members of families in which the head of household had completed less than a high school education.

(7) **Assessed Intelligence**: Some research indicates that approximately 3.4 percent of dropouts had an I.Q. of 120 or higher. Other projects find no correlation between an individual's mental ability and his or her tendency to drop out (Levin, 1987, p. 4).

(8) **Socioeconomic Status**: Weidman and Friedmann (1984, p. 27) indicate a "striking inverse relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and school dropout rates." Their research found that in 1979, 60 percent of the Black males and 77 percent of the Black females who dropped out of school came from families with annual incomes of less than $10,000.

(9) **Work Experience**: Dropouts are less likely to have held part-time jobs during their high school years. High school graduates were about twice as likely as dropouts to have had work experience during their school years (Weidman and Friedmann, 1984, p. 28).

Researchers attempting to predict what will happen to the dropout rate in the future offer the following speculations:

- A Wisconsin study indicates that the percentage of youth who fail to complete high school is increasing (Wisconsin Vocational Studies Center, 1981, p. 5).
- Hahn's review of the dropout phenomena shows it to be a multifaceted problem. It starts early, has many causes, and grows incrementally worse with each successive year (Hahn, 1987, p. 257).
- Poulos indicates that the dropout rate has in fact not decreased in the past two decades and may be rising (Poulos, 1986, p. 5).

In summary, students who drop out of school will face limited occupational and economic prospects, disenfranchisement from society and its institutions, and a substantial loss of income. Society faces increased expenditures; for government assistance to these individuals and families, for higher rates of crime, and for the maintenance of costly programs such as employment and training (McDill, Natriello and Pallas, 1986, p. 7).

THE SCOPE OF THE DROPOUT PROBLEM: TEXAS STATISTICS

In 1984, House Bill 72, Texas' reform legislation as enacted by state lawmakers, mandated that the state dropout rate be reduced. In an attempt to understand the magnitude of the problem, an assessment titled the Texas School Dropout Survey Project (Texas Education Agency, 1988, p. 1) was completed in 1986. Findings from this research project indicated the following:

- The attrition rate for Texas high school students was estimated at 33 percent.
- Three out of every ten Texas dropouts, or 152,000 young people, had completed less than nine years of schooling when they left school.
- Nearly half a million Texas youth between the ages of 16 and 24 were not enrolled in school and had never completed the twelfth grade.

Additionally, this data will not remain static as further examination of the state's demographic information reveals the emergence of some startling facts:

(1) **Demography**: The Texas population will be over 40 percent ethnic/racial minority by the end of the century and the in-school minority population will be over 50 percent. The fate of Texas' ethnic groups is inextricably linked - if one succeeds, so does the other (Hodgkinson, 1986, p. 11).

(2) **Economic Development**: Texas ranks 42nd nationally in the percentage of its youth who graduate from high school. Almost one-third of all Texas youth begin adult life without a high school diploma. Only 69 percent of Texas' 233,457 ninth graders graduated from high school in 1984. During that same time period, Minnesota graduated 96 percent of its students (Hodgkinson, 1986, p. 3).

As Hodgkinson (1986, p. 11) so succinctly summarized, "Texas in the future will have no 'throw-away' youth who can be disposed of without concern. Every person will have to fulfill his/her potential if the state is to fulfill its destiny."

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Operational Definitions

In order to assure effective communication between practitioners, it is necessary to establish a precise understanding of terms. In defining a given word, it is presupposed that valid and reliable interpretations of the term exist. However, when attempting to operationally define words associated with the "at-risk" literature, there exists a general level of "fuzziness" which shrouds even the most commonly used terms. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that practitioners and researchers alike often coin new phrases to describe particular situations.

A review of the literature related to at-risk and dropout youth reveals an array of operational definitions. In this section is a representative sampling of the types of definitions which exist for both terms. This overview begins with some operational definitions for the word "at-risk." This term appears to be a relative newcomer to the literature. Operational definitions of the word are not nearly as numerous as those for "dropout." The following definitions are representative of those currently available.

According to House Bill 1010, passed by the 70th Texas State Legislature and effective September 1, 1987; the definition of students at risk of dropping out of school includes each student in Grades 7-12 who is under 21 years of age and who:

- Was not advanced from one grade level to the next two or more school years,
- Has mathematics or reading skills that are two or more years below grade level,
- Did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more courses during a semester or is not maintaining such an average in two or more courses in the current semester, and is not expected to graduate within four years of the date the student begins ninth grade, or
- Did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered in the seventh, ninth, or twelfth grade.

In addition to low academic performance, the student often:

- Is adjudged delinquent, abuses drugs or alcohol,
- Is limited in English proficiency,
- Receives compensatory or remedial instruction,
- Is sexually, physically, or psychologically abused,
- Is pregnant,
- Is a slower learner,
- Enrolls late in the school year,
- Stops attending school before the end of the school year, or

- Is unmotivated.

Additional definitions include those offered by Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh (1987, p. 71), "those students who are 16 years old, have six credits or less toward graduation, and are frequently truant," or McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986, p. 4), "those students likely to leave school prior to high school graduation."

Grasping a definition of "dropout" is equally difficult. A dropout is no longer just a "dropout" - he or she may be classified as a fallout, pushout, pullout, fade-out, discouraged, or defeated (Green and Baker, 1986, p. 11). It has even been suggested that educators begin to monitor more closely "dropins," those students who are in school but not preparing for anything past the twelfth grade.

Attempting to provide an operational definition for the term dropout falls into direct conflict with the efforts made by many researchers. Not only do definitions leave many questions unanswered, some researchers feel that this lack of a uniform definition is an important hindrance to combating the dropout enigma (Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu, 1987; National School Safety Center, 1986; Texas Education Agency, 1988). Often, out of a sense of expediency a definition which has received widespread acceptance is adopted. From those districts, agencies, and institutions which do define "dropout," the following definitions have been collected as representative of those currently in use:

- The Current Population Survey (CPS) defines dropouts as "persons neither enrolled in schools nor high school graduates." This definition includes categories such as "pregnant teenagers" or "needed at home."

- "If you aren't in school and you haven't graduated, you're a dropout" (Hahn, 1987, p. 257).

- The Bureau of Attendance for the State of New York has defined a dropout as "a pupil over compulsory attendance age who leaves school on his own volition before graduation from high school and without transferring to another school" (Barber and McClellan, 1987, p. 264).

The federal government has defined a dropout as "a student who leaves a school, for any reason except death... who has been in membership during the regular school term and who withdraws before graduation... or completing an equivalent program of studies, whether dropping out occurs before or after [reaching] compulsory school attendance age" (Barber and McClellan, 1987, p. 264). Or, a dropout is a student who:

- Was enrolled in the school district at the close of the 1986-87 school year,

- Did not graduate by diploma,

- Was absent for more than 29 unexcused consecutive school days during the 1987-88 school year, and

- Did not have records forwarded to another school (Source: Texas A&M University, School/University Collaborative, 1988, p. 5).

A dropout has also been defined as "a pupil who leaves school, for any reasons except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school" (Gruskin, Campbell, and Paulu, 1987, p. 25).

Duhon and Mouton (1985, p. 9) further define a dropout as simply "any student who leaves school prior to high school graduation for any reason except for his death."

Another definition is offered by The California State Department of Education. They state that "a dropout is any student who has been enrolled in grade 10, 11, or 12 but who left school prior to graduation or the completion of a formal education or the legal equivalent, and who did not within 45 days enter another public or private educational institution or school program, as documented by a written request for a transcript from that institution" (Henry, 1986, p. 6).

In Texas, in accordance with the Dropout Reduction Program Act, Section 11.205 (e) of the Texas Education Code (TEC), a dropout is defined an individual who:

- Does not hold a high school diploma or equivalent,
- Is absent from the public school in which the student is enrolled for a period of 30 or more consecutive days, and
- Whose attendance within that period at another public school or a private or parochial school cannot be evidenced.

From this collection of diverse verbiage, there appear to be some criteria which are always included, others that are often found, and some that are unique to the individual definition. An appropriate closing comment is that dropout definitions across the literature are built to address individual situations and understandings. As more is learned about this complex topic, operational definitions may converge, and a more universally accepted definition can emerge.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT AND THE SCHOOLS THEY ATTEND

Why Do Students Drop Out Of School?

One of the problems encountered by researchers who study at-risk youth is that our nation's schools have typically not done a good job in recording information about students who drop out. This information can be pieced together through tedious and time-consuming efforts, but unless sufficient incentives to do so exist, data which can reliably be used to answer questions will remain scattered, particulate, and largely unanalyzed. Because of the lack of objective data, researchers have typically surveyed or interviewed students who have dropped out of schools to find out why they have dropped out. From these contacts, they have developed, and often rank-ordered lists of characteristics which can be linked to students who are considered to be at-risk.

However, there are some serious limitations to the survey/interview process. Perhaps the most obvious is that students may not be in the best position to reliably and accurately describe all of the information which is sought. Poulos (1986) found that in one study, "slightly more than one-half of the youths had reported a "C" average in report card marks prior to dropping out of school." Poulos noted that the retrospective self-appraisal of academic performance may have been "somewhat inflated since it was rather contrary to school-related reasons given by the respondents for dropping out, in which failing grades were cited by many as major reasons for school termination" (p. 34). Poulos suggested that a "D" average would have been a more realistic assessment of these students' academic performances.

Depending upon which study or meta-analysis one reviews, there are likely to be as many as twenty to twenty-five different factors which are given as reasons that students drop out of our nation's schools. Given the imprecise classification schemes and the absence of standard definitions and measurements, subtleties and semantics have a large impact on how these factors are characterized. For example, in this document, poor reading, lack of basic skills, below grade-level performance, and failing competency tests are grouped in a category labeled "low academic achievement." Other reports keep these categories separate. Still, this document discusses over twenty different characteristics which are associated with students who drop out of school and with students who are at risk of doing so.

The characteristics of at-risk students mentioned most often in the literature are: low academic achievement, dissatisfaction with teachers, dissatisfaction with school, absenteeism and truancy, rebellious attitudes and disruptive behavior, the desire or need to work, pregnancy, and marriage. These data correlate well with existing reviews of research (e.g., Green and Baker's 1986 review which cites the Oregon Department of Education Study of Early School Leavers; the dropout study conducted by the Edmonds, Washington School District; and the High School and Beyond Study).

Researchers agree that a multiplicity of factors culminate in a student's decision to drop out of school. For example, Green and Baker (1986) note that "there is overwhelming agreement that no single factor is more important than any other in predicting who is likely to drop out. Most studies agree that dropping out of school is usually the result of a combination of student-related factors" (p. 11). Similarly, the California State Department of Education's report (1986) concludes from an extensive literature review that "Written reports on etiological research all emphasize the multiplicity of causes." McDill and others (1985) write of "multiple causes of dropping out," which they group into factors related to school, current family obligations, family conditions, and the lure of paid work. An Assembly Office of Research report (1985) stated: "Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons: they are not succeeding in school, they want to work, they are

pregnant or they run out of time or desire to pass the required courses and the local tests of minimum proficiency." A literature review for the Association of California Urban School Districts (1985) listed twenty known characteristics of dropouts and grouped these as cognitive, affective, family, and demographic variables. The California Department of Education has identified 24 personal and family-related dropout variables. Some of the school variables are obvious warning signs that a student is on the way to dropping out: absenteeism, truancy, frequent tardiness, poor or declining grades, low test scores, limited extracurricular participation, disruptive or rebellious behavior, and discipline/suspension/expulsion problems (p. 3).

According to Green and Baker (1986), the best and most recent data available for learning about the dropout problem comes from the High School and Beyond Study, which was a longitudinal project sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). It consists of a survey of nearly 60,000 students (sophomores and seniors) beginning in 1980. This study has confirmed findings from prior research that identified the following characteristics of students who had dropped out of school: low socio-economic status, membership in an ethnic or racial minority group, unsatisfactory relationship with family, low academic achievement, dissatisfaction with school, delinquent or truant behavior, low self-esteem, enrollment in a nonacademic curriculum, the need to work, and early pregnancy/marriage.

Nevertheless, knowing that there are several factors associated with at-risk youth may not help a practitioner who wants to identify and assist a particular set of individuals. After all, most students manifest (at one time or another) at least one of these characteristics. So that at-risk youth could be more easily targeted for assistance, researchers have attempted to identify the factors most common to those who have dropped out of school. Several authors have been willing to suggest characteristics which, they assert, are most closely associated with those who drop out of school and, therefore, with at-risk students. These characteristics are:

- "Truancy among marginal students" (Green and Baker, p. 14).
- "Poor academic performance" (Hahn, 1987, p. 259).
- "A history of failure in school starting in elementary grades" (California State Department of Education, 1986, p. 3).
- "Frequent absenteeism and academic failure" (Stroup and Robins 1972; Schreiber 1967; Silberberg and Silberberg, 1971; Kaplan and Luck, 1977).
- "School performance, as measured by grades, and extent of problem behavior" (Green and Baker, 1986, p. 12 citing a study sponsored by the Educational Testing Service).
- "The school system and the way we teach" (Duhon and Mouton, 1985, p. 5, quoting James Coleman).

Who Is Most Likely To Drop Out Of School?

According to Poulos (1986), a typical dropout during the two year period of 1982-84 was of ethnic/racial minority origin, sixteen or seventeen years of age, in the ninth or tenth grade at the time of school departure, and overaged for grade by two years. There is a slightly higher probability that the early school leaver was male. If the individual was female, the chances were two-out-of-five that she was pregnant at the time of dropping out. If the youth was a male, there was a one-out-of-twenty chance that he left school for reasons of impending or actual fatherhood.

The High School and Beyond Study cited by Green and Baker (1986) reports that males who leave school prior to graduation most often cite poor grades as the reason they dropped out of school. Following in order, they also mentioned that they disliked school, took a job, couldn't get along with teachers, had to support their family, or were expelled or suspended. The same study reported that females cite marriage as the most common reason they chose to drop out. Additional reasons mentioned were that they disliked school, got poor grades, became pregnant, were offered a job, or couldn't get along with teachers.

However, there often is little correlation between a student's abilities and his or her tendency to drop out of school. According to Green and Baker (1986), "there is general consensus that dropping out is not necessarily related to intelligence; children of all levels of ability and intelligence drop out of school" (p. 11).

When Are At-Risk Students Most Likely To Drop Out Of School?

To further help practitioners in identifying at-risk populations, researchers have also studied when students drop out. According to Henry (1986), the California Postsecondary Education Commissions Directors Report (1985) identified three critical periods when most dropouts decide to leave school. These are during junior high, at age 16, and just before high school graduation. Green and Baker (1986) cite a Eugene, Oregon study by Schellenberg (1985) which found that absenteeism in the 9th grade was a strong predictor of students at risk of dropping out. The extent to which these figures correspond to compulsory attendance laws was not addressed formally, but that relationship seems apparent.

However, a National Public School Relations Association report states, "The decision to leave may often be detected even in the early years of elementary school. Among the signs are: (a) inability to read at grade level, (b) rebellious attitude toward teachers, classroom disruptions and emotional disturbances, (c) frequent absenteeism and (d) a pattern of failure in school work" (1972, p. 5). Boyer (1987) wrote, "If failure is not to become a way of life for many urban youths, we must recognize that poverty and schooling are connected. What we see as poor academic performance may be related to events that precede schooling and even birth itself" (p. 5).

School Characteristics

It is both a wonderful and terrifying fact that researchers have begun to identify poor teachers, ineffective teaching techniques, and school environments as factors which contribute significantly to the high dropout rate among American youth (Gadwa, Christensen, Bryan, and Boeck, 1983; Green and Baker, 1986; and Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). It is wonderful because if it is true, then practitioners can make significant progress in reducing dropout rates, if that which they control and understand can be modified. It is terrifying because if it is true, then educators have been identified as contributors to, not solvers of, many problems faced by at-risk youth.

An example of the research which identifies school-controlled factors which increase, rather than reduce, dropout rates has been provided by Wehlage and Rutter (1986). They found that socioeconomic status and school performance are important variables in determining who drops out. However, in their analyses, these variables are less powerful than students' perceptions about teacher interest in them, as well as the effectiveness and fairness of school discipline. Wehlage and Rutter suggest that the phenomena of school dropouts is better conceived and can be better addressed if it is viewed as a result of a combination of specific student characteristics with certain

school conditions. Regardless of other factors, it is important to note that alienation from teachers and school is a common characteristic among students who drop out.

Additional evidence for the role that schools play in affecting at-risk students is cited by Green and Baker (1986). They included a 1985 study by Sexton which analyzed dropout rates in Portland, Oregon by school and residential area. This study found that school leaving was more highly correlated with the school attended than with the student's residential area. The analysis of outcomes among students who had been forced to transfer because of school closures was particularly insightful: dropout rates of students from particular neighborhoods were cut in half after they entered a different school. Socioeconomic status and home environment were far less influential factors on school retention than was school attended. These findings illustrate the potential of schools to overcome such influences and reduce the loss of students.

McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) have identified characteristics of schools which have high dropout rates. They report that these schools:

- Have high rates of student disorder and discipline problems,
- Are concentrated in large cities and are themselves large in size,
- Have a high proportion of economically disadvantaged ethnic and racial minority students,
- Have poor teacher-administration cooperation,
- Have teachers who emphasize the maintenance of control in classes rather than instructional objectives,
- Have teachers who employ ambiguous sanctions (e.g., lowering grades as a disciplinary practice or ignoring misbehavior), or
- Have rules that are not clear or fair or students who do not believe in conventional social rules (p. 157).

These findings are consistent with the effective schools research, which developed as a response to the idea that low achievement by poor children was due to certain inherent disabilities. This research and the strategies which have emerged from it emphasize the potential of schools to overcome the influence of student background characteristics and to reduce the number of students who are not successful in school (Green and Baker, 1986; Texas Education Agency, 1988).

The urgency of successfully identifying at-risk children, however, needs to be balanced with the greater professional goal of "doing no harm to the client." For example, more harm than good may result if dropout prevention programs result in stigmatizing at-risk children by labelling them as "underachievers" and placing them in "special" groups. According to a California State Department of Education report (1986), if a student is "predicted" to be a potential dropout, the labelling itself has consequences, not all of which are helpful for the child. On the other hand, it does not help to ignore obvious symptoms that a student is having trouble (p. 4).

SUMMARY

Why Do Youth Drop Out Of School?

There are a discrete number of factors that can be easily associated with at-risk youth. Those who drop out of school, do so as a result of a complex combination of factors ranging from poor academic performance, dissatisfaction with school and/or teachers, the need or desire to work, family problems, marriage, or pregnancy.

Who Is Most Likely To Drop Out Of School?

Students most likely to drop out of school are those who are members of ethnic/racial minority groups, who come from families of low socioeconomic status, and who have basic skills which are below average.

When Are At-Risk Youth Most Likely To Drop Out Of School?

Even though students may drop out with more frequency at certain ages (in the ninth grade or at age 16 being the most likely), the factors which form the foundation of at-risk behaviors can begin at any age (even before birth, according to some researchers).

Identifying at-risk populations is relatively easy compared with predicting which student will be the next dropout. In their desire to help at-risk youth, practitioners may be tempted to turn to models which can be used to predict which students will drop out. But Quay and Allen (1982) caution against the temptation to rely on predictive models for designing interventions. They note that the percentage of correct predictions by most models often does not exceed the percentage that could be obtained with no model at all. Unless predictive models do a significantly and consistently better job than no model, their practical use is limited.

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"Too often we have been treating symptoms rather than causes. Teenage parenting, youth joblessness, and dropping out of school are closely intertwined. Yet the researchers and practitioners who work on these issues generally view them as distinct problems. Sociologists and social workers focus on the family and teenage pregnancy, educators concentrate on schooling and dropouts, and labor economists emphasize employment and training. This has led to a circle of endless "mysteries" and "puzzles" that has some of the finest researchers and leaders in the country concluding that we simply do not know what to do about these problems."

(Berlin and Sum, 1988, p. 27)

KEEPING AT-RISK YOUTH IN SCHOOL: WHAT WORKS

Introduction

Finding sufficient empirical data to identify strategies that work is a tremendous challenge. Dale Mann notes, "We have better national descriptions of youth at risk than we have local descriptions of programs that work" (1986, p. 68). Mann points out that although there is an astonishing array of things being done that are considered helpful to dropout prevention, little research has been completed to evaluate specific interventions in terms of effects. Because of inaccurate or incomplete methods of documenting intervention strategies and insufficient resources to dedicate to systematic program evaluation, much of what is considered "effective" is based solely on program descriptions. We need to trust that practitioners who have worked with at-risk children for years know what works for their students, even if school districts have not been able to conduct thorough evaluations (Green and Baker, 1986, p. 33).

Publications such as Texas Education Agency's IMAGES (1988) and the dropout prevention sourcebook published by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (1987) provide lists of programs, but do not furnish evaluation results. Most of the documents reviewed for this guide followed similar practices. As Hodgkinson has noted, "Given the basically local nature of such dropout prevention programs, there exists a major need to coordinate and share information on what works and why" (p. 12).

Despite the obvious need to be able to ascertain what works, there appears to be no clear-cut, widely accepted set of evaluation criteria for judging the effectiveness of specific strategies. These criteria usually include a combination of the following: reduction in dropout rates, reduction in behavioral and attendance problems and improved achievement. These data are typically gathered on a school-wide, rather than on a program-specific basis. After all, in order to conduct empirical research, control groups need to be established. But creating a control group to obtain comparative data for at-risk students who have been identified, but for whom no attempts will be made to keep them in school, is not professionally defensible. Naturalistic inquiry and case study techniques can be used to help overcome this problem, but tend to be time-consuming, expensive, and limited in their generalizability. In addition, few programs are funded at levels which provide individualized assistance for at-risk students while maintaining a reserve for evaluation and follow-up studies.

Green and Baker (1986) indicate that nearly every article and report they reviewed had "a somewhat different list of characteristics of successful intervention programs," and "only a few even attempted to organize their list into general categories." Mann notes that "even sorting the preventive from the remedial interventions (i.e., before and after dropping out) would help, but this is seldom done" (in Texas Education Agency, 1988, p. 7).

Dale Mann states that "without even addressing the outcomes question, the only thing that is clear is that most districts are doing a lot of things" and that, unfortunately from the program improvement perspective, findings related to these efforts have not been adequately researched or analyzed. Mann concludes that "there appears to be no clear-cut, widely accepted" framework for categorizing dropout programs (Mann, 1987). Similarly, Green and Baker state that a set of criteria for judging the effectiveness of specific program strategies does not exist. Furthermore, Green and Baker stress that many programs lack sufficient funds or longitudinal data to evaluate their efforts systematically on that basis. Beyond obvious goals, few studies have tried to link outcomes to specific strategies (Green and Baker, 1986).

Practitioners will find themselves in general agreement with Green and Baker's (1986) comment about the "blizzard" of approaches, the lack of consensus on outcome measures, and the consequent dearth of evidence on what works (p. 17). As a result, much of what is known to be effective in the prevention and recovery of dropouts is based solely on program descriptions and analyses of existing dropout prevention and recovery approaches and strategies.

Strategies

Mann (1986) emphasizes that the construction of a taxonomy of dropout prevention and recovery strategies "is the first step in finding out what works best: academic, vocational, or guidance approaches." According to Mann, such a framework would categorize dropout programs by distinguishing "differences among programs that may be related to differences in outcomes." However, the measurement of program differences often depends on the analysis of curriculum and other program components such as "data about objectives, learner diagnosis, program content, program delivery, resources and pupil progress evaluation(s)."

Wehlage and Rutter (in Green and Baker, 1986) believe that program success can and should be evaluated on the basis of visible criteria, such as a reduced dropout rate, less frequent truancy and disruptive behaviors, and improved competencies in basic skills. Other less tangible variables may also indicate success: improved self-esteem, increased locus of control and perception of opportunities, greater degree of social bonding, and more participation in the shared values of society (p. 20).

Although there are few data which detail what works in terms of specific programs or strategies, researchers report several characteristics that are common across the multitude of strategies and programs which are designed to reduce dropout rates. Green and Baker (1986) reviewed eighteen effective program reports and formulated a list of shared characteristics of these programs. A summary of their findings is as follows:

- **Staffing**: Programs need to be staffed with qualified, caring teachers who have the ability to establish rapport and develop personal relationships with students.

- **Curriculum**: Curriculum should be challenging, relevant, and meaningful. Activities should be based on real-life experiences and goals and should emphasize personal development, focus on preparation for work, and incorporate basic skills remediation with other academic work.

- **Methodology**: Programs should be small with a low student/teacher ratio. Instruction should be individualized in terms of pacing, ability, and content and should provide the opportunity to foster social bonding. Students need to be able to experience success. Staff should set clear expectations and standards based on realistic goals and provide immediate feedback and clear, valid criteria for evaluating performance. Rewards and sanctions should be consistent and appropriate.

- **Administrative support**: Many local programs cite the importance of having the support and commitment of the local school district administrators.

Programs must be attractive to youth and teachers alike, and should deliver an inventive curriculum which can provide students with the knowledge, services, and experiences that stimulate cognitive, personal, and social growth (Texas Education Agency, 1988; Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh, 1987).

Conclusion

There is a consensus among researchers that no single approach or strategy is effective for all at-risk students or dropouts. Different individuals have different educational/vocational interests and needs.

Andrew Hahn and his colleagues emphasize, in Dropouts in America: Enough is Known for Action, that it is not practical to formulate broad policy customized to the individual needs of each at-risk student. However, it is critical that initiatives in education and employment respond to the different segments of the at-risk youth population. Efforts to intervene must respond to each individual's distinctive and varied requirements (Texas Education Agency, 1988, p. 16).

Furthermore, the nested individual, familial, peer, social, economic, and school-related problems of each at-risk student or dropout require a response to that individual's entire life. We need "far greater integration and coordination of the social services, child welfare and educational systems than has been attempted up to now" (Hahn, 1987; Texas Education Agency, 1988).

Rumberger (1983) suggests that a comprehensive dropout reduction strategy should include the following elements:

- Different programs designed for various types of dropouts,
- An appropriate mix of educational and noneducational services in each program,
- Accurate and timely identification of students with a high risk of dropping out, and
- Programs designed for early prevention, late prevention [retention], and recovery (Rumberger, 1987; Texas Education Agency, 1988).

Mann (1987) states that complex problems require ambitious solutions and that a comprehensive solution to the dropout problem implicates everyone: schools, youth employment programs, civic agencies, parents, community-based organizations, and business and industry. Researchers and practitioners agree that an effective dropout prevention program cannot be based on a single element such as remedial instruction or the provision of social services.

"Furthermore, the particular details of a successful dropout program need to be shaped by local circumstances, resources, and the talents of those involved. Thus, it appears that effective program responses to the dropout problem are as highly individualized and complex as the problems which confront at-risk students and dropouts. Academic reforms must address the needs of at-risk youth directly, rather than assume that raising general standards will automatically meet the needs of all students" (Levin, 1987 p. 19; Texas Education Agency, 1988).

"Knowing why the majority of students are dropping out is essential to developing appropriate interventions. For example, if students seem to be dropping out for economic reasons, a work-related approach would be helpful. If students seem to be dropping out because of a lack of basic skills, a remedial approach might be in order" (Wisconsin Vocational Studies Center, 1981, p. 4).

For those who want to establish early preventive interventions, "identifying when students are psychologically dropping out of school, or beginning to exhibit self-defeating behaviors, can be even more helpful in determining the most strategic time(s) and grade(s) to focus intervention efforts. Many educators feel that dropout prevention efforts, even if not labelled as such, need to be established in the elementary schools--sometimes as early as the first grade. If an intervention

effort is implemented soon enough, it is hoped that the student might be helped before a cycle of failure or negative behavior is fully developed" (Wisconsin Vocational Studies Center, 1981, p. 5).

Naturally, the active support and involvement of school administration, school staff, and the community are important, even key, ingredients to the success of a dropout prevention effort. "To gain this support, the design of an effort should reflect school and community values and should incorporate a plan for developing good school/community relations" (Wisconsin Vocational Studies Center, 1981, p. 5).

To succeed, dropout prevention programs require a cohesive, integrated effort that combines the following components:

- Mentorships and intensive, sustained counseling for troubled youth,
- An array of social services, including health care, family planning education, and infant care facilities for adolescent mothers,
- Concentrated remediation using individualized instruction and competency-based curricula,
- Effective school/business collaborations that provide ongoing access to the mainstream economy,
- Improved incentives, including financial rewards for completing high school,
- Year-round schools and alternative schools,
- Heightened accountability for dropout rates at all levels of the system of public education, and
- Involvement of parents and community organizations in dropout prevention (Hahn, 1987, pp. 260-261).

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE CONCERNS

Research Finding:

Of all at-risk students, those who are not achieving on par or who are not progressing through school with their peers (i.e., who are held back a grade) are the most at risk of dropping out of school.

- The single best predictor of whether or not a student will drop out of school is his or her level of academic achievement. The typical at-risk student has mathematics or reading skills two or more years below grade level and is not maintaining a scholastic average of 70 percent.
- Poor reading ability is the single best predictor of a student's inability to achieve in school.
- There is a strong relationship between low basic skills achievement and the incidence of welfare dependency.
- The higher the test scores in reading, word knowledge, and mathematics, the less likely it is that a young person will drop out of school prior to graduation.
- It is almost impossible to compensate for the loss that children incur academically as well as socially when they do not learn how to read in the early grades.
- Students who have repeated a grade are more likely to drop out than those who proceed from grade to grade on schedule.
- Direct indicators of at-risk populations include low test scores, a lack of thoroughness or logical development in one's school work, and a sense of low ability or little control over academic success or failure.
- Students with limited reading, mathematics, and vocabulary skills are much more likely to experience some social pathology. The lower the test score, the higher the concentration of people experiencing a particular social problem.

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"Some researchers contend that, where dropout rates are concerned, expenditures are less important than a school's organization, the quality of its teaching and administration, and its innovations in curriculum."
(Hahn, 1987, p. 258)

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Pacing and Content

Research Finding:

To successfully compensate for below-average performance, dropout programs need to be able to advance at-risk students at faster rates than comparable programs in the "normal" curriculum. These programs, in order to maintain attention and stimulate student progress, must be action-based, relevant to students' interests, and academically challenging.

- Any dropout prevention/recovery program that does not focus on raising the academic achievement levels of students is unlikely to have a significant, lasting effect on school dropout rates or on the longer term issues of employability and earnings.
- Unfortunately, the usual treatment of educationally disadvantaged students is not designed to bring them up to grade level. No timetables exist for doing so, and few incentives or even provisions are available to move students from remedial instruction to the educational mainstream.
- It is fundamentally impossible to eliminate the factor which contributes the most to at-risk behaviors, low achievement, if students in those programs continue to progress at comparable or slower rates than do their peers in regular education programs.
- Programs which allow at-risk students to progress slowly, or programs which are not challenging, reinforce practitioners' low expectations of these students and also reinforce students' views of themselves as incapable of success.
- Early intervention programs must intervene before children's poor scholastic habits become difficult to change and block future learning.

Effective Programs:

- Create learning activities characterized by high expectations and learning environments delineated by high status for the participants.
- Have deadlines for closing the gap between the performance of at-risk students and students in the educational mainstream.
- Have clear and explicit goals, objectives and criteria for judging success which correspond directly to program content.
- Avoid pejorative terms and labels (for example, "remedial," "at-risk").

- Combine basic skills education with vocational training in order to make basic skills instruction relevant and provide active learning roles for the students.
- Allow for individualization of each student's needs and considerations.
- Provide prompt feedback and concrete evidence of progress.

Compensatory programs, which are designed to narrow the gap between the achievement of at-risk students and their peers, need to be experientially-based. That is, students should not experience endless repetition of material through drill and practice. Rather, they should be actively involved in "learning by doing." In successful programs, curriculum are used which apply learning to everyday problems and events.

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TEACHER INVOLVEMENT AND LOCAL CONTROL

Research Finding:

> *Teachers who are involved with programs designed for at-risk students need to be held accountable for student progress in order for these programs to succeed. To provide a basis for accountability, teachers need to have ownership in and be provided flexibility for program design, implementation, and evaluation. Each school must choose its own curriculum and instructional strategies: those who provide the instruction should make the decisions. The long term success of educational programs depends on local ownership and staff development.*

- Sufficient support needs to be provided to allow teachers to improve skills and knowledge, plan curriculum and instruction, acquire resources, and share ideas and problems with their peers.
- Implementing successful programs which address the needs of educationally disadvantaged students requires extensive teacher participation.
- Teaching in a district's at-risk programs should be construed as an entitlement rather than a penalty. The best teachers should be involved. By labelling both children and teachers in these programs as inferior, educational practitioners contribute to a weakening of social support for the activity. Therefore, low social status as well as negative self-images for the persons engaged in the programs are perpetuated.

When Teachers:

- Feel unsupported, they are more likely to pass their discouragement along to students.
- Work in a collegial atmosphere, their effectiveness often improves.
- Are provided special training, they can relate better to at-risk students and rearrange instructional sequences in ways that are more appropriate.
- Actively involve parents in implementing programs (by assisting their children and committing to the goals of the program), program success rates increase.
- Have the authority to control admissions and dismissals in the program, they can be more accountable.
- Aren't able to work under these conditions, they should be replaced.

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PROGRAM SIZE

Research Finding:

> *Small classes bring increased academic gains. If the goal is to accelerate rather than maintain equal or slower rates of growth, programs designed for at-risk youth need to be small in scale with a low student/adult ratio.*

- The most dramatic increases in student achievement occur when the student/teacher ratio is less than fifteen to one. Establishing and maintaining this ratio is especially important during students' early years of schooling (e.g., grades one through three).
- Teacher salary and per-pupil expenditures are not related to dropout rates, although student/teacher ratios do correlate with the incidence of dropping out. Dropout rates among schools with the most favorable student/teacher ratios are less than two-thirds as high as those among schools with the worst ratios.

Small Program Size Is Crucial For Several Reasons:

- Face-to-face relationships on a continuing basis are necessary if teachers are to communicate the sense of caring that students may perceive as absent in the regular school.
- Small numbers permit teachers to both personalize and individualize their instructional efforts.
- Teachers can more easily and systematically keep track of detailed information about their students.
- Small size facilitates continued face-to-face communication among faculty for planning and meeting about matters of mutual concern.
- Small size permits faculty to create a clear identity for the program, to administer the program, and to be responsible for both the program and individual students.

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TUTORING AND MENTORING

Research Finding:

> *Tutoring may be the most cost-effective way to raise achievement levels. It yields greater achievement per dollar than any other educational innovation. When students help other students, both attendance and achievement increase. At-risk students can act as tutors as well as tutees in successful programs.*

- Students who tutor profit academically from the experience, but tutoring has even broader benefits. Coleman (1974) proposed that the environment of young people should provide not only an opportunity for reaching traditional school goals, but also an avenue for gaining social maturity through responsibilities that affect the lives of others.
- Some educators report that tutoring, more than any other intervention, has helped students succeed and has created a caring academic environment.
- Tutors learn positive verbal and nonverbal communication skills (e.g., active listening, conversing, and praising good effort), as well as how to give clear directions and confirm correct responses. They learn not to overprompt and show impatience, annoyance, or disappointment.

Tutors can:

- Explain methods for studying a course.
- Give suggestions on how to study the text.
- Review course outlines and objectives with students.
- Review and explain class assignments.
- Check students' work to see whether or not errors are being made and make suggestions for improvement.
- Point out major topics, concepts, and information in the course which are essential to understanding the subject.
- Explain difficult concepts, methods, or information in the course.
- Explain how to study for an examination in the course, and how to identify topics which may be covered in the examination.
- Conduct review sessions before examinations.
- Produce more than twice as much achievement as computer-assisted instruction, and three times more achievement than reducing class size from 35 to 30 students.

At-Risk Students as Tutors:

- Seem to be just as effective in helping their pupils improve as are tutors with higher than average intellectual status.
- Develop and mature socially.
- Find themselves as active providers of knowledge.
- Usually tutor students in the elementary and/or middle grades.

Tutoring Programs Are Successful When:

- Tutors have a highly structured and carefully prescribed lesson format.
- Classroom teachers define objectives in terms of their classroom curricula and evaluate student competence in relation to success or failure in those materials.
- Teachers select tutoring content carefully and ensure that students master it.
- They are scheduled daily for moderate length (half-hour) sessions.
- They are systematic.
- Tutors are trained. Untrained tutors tend to **not** confirm accurate responses regularly, give corrective feedback, offer praise, or engage in friendly conversation before and after tutoring.
- There is a positive class climate and active supervision.
- Students' progress is assessed daily.
- Tutors are not younger than eleven or twelve.
- Tutors are matched with tutees so that positive rapport is established.
- Materials used in, or linked to, tutoring sessions are carefully designed.
- They meet the needs of the tutee. A student who is failing because of serious emotional problems; for example, does not necessarily need remedial reading help.

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"Millions of young people are 'at-risk' because, to be full-fledged participants in our society, they desperately need an education. It is simply not true that we don't know what to do about it. We do. We must teach them in accord with the way they learn."

(Hodges, 1987, p. 3)

MOTIVATION AND SCHOOL CLIMATE CONCERNS

Research Finding:

> *Somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of those who drop out of school do so because school seems irrelevant or because they can't get along with their teachers.*

For Many At-Risk Students, School Is Not A Pleasant Place Because Of:

- Fear of gang members.
- Language barriers and social isolation from other students.
- Conflict with school officials.
- Irrelevant and inflexible curricula.
- Uncaring and unconcerned faculty and administration.
- Unfair or unclear rules and regulations.

School leaders must accept the fact that much of the responsibility for at-risk students rests with the school system. Urban public school superintendents agree that we cannot assume that the present organization of schools is the best way to educate young people. To require a failing student in an urban ghetto to take another unit of mathematics or foreign language, without offering a better teaching environment, raises a new hurdle without providing more assistance.

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STRATEGIES TO ALTER SCHOOL CLIMATE AND BUILD STUDENT MOTIVATION

Altering Classroom Climate

Research Finding:

Trust and mutual respect are essential for learning to take place. It is important that teachers believe at-risk students deserve a renewed opportunity to learn. High expectations from others (particularly teachers and parents) are decisive in developing student self-esteem and motivation.

- To motivate students, it is important that they see academics has a practical use. Academic skills should be presented and taught as tools, means to an end, rather than ends in themselves.
- In successful programs, classroom interaction consists mainly of students initiating and teachers responding. The effective alternative classroom is often quantitatively and qualitatively different from that found in the educational mainstream.

Teachers in Effective Alternative Programs:

- Respect their students, help them take responsibility, and provide them with alternatives.
- Are trained and provided ongoing training to broaden their repertoire of techniques for classroom management, constructive discipline, and instruction, using multiple modalities of sight, sound, touch, and movement.
- Build personal relationships with their students.
- Increase the time provided for each student to respond in class discussions.
- Individualize instruction.
- Are attuned to their students' academic and social problems as well as their cultural backgrounds.
- Emphasize "integration," enabling students to recognize what they have learned and to believe that they are really more capable than they were before attending the program.
- Are committed to program success.
- Have autonomy to make decisions.

Students in These Programs:

- Are helped to function appropriately in regular educational settings. They do not become dependent upon the support of the alternative program.
- Are actively engaged in learning.

Teaching and Classroom Management Strategies In These Programs:

- Break the vicious cycle of rebellion and repression that can destroy the climate for learning.
- Alter instruction for non-English speaking students.
- Maintain orderly classrooms.
- Deliver challenging and appropriate curriculum.

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ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Research Finding:

Alternative schools are not always effective unless the students they serve are highly motivated. In magnet schools (or schools that parents are allowed to choose based on their children's needs, interests, and abilities) attendance is higher and dropout rates are lower than district averages.

- Isolating students in separate alternative schools or vocational programs can reduce their self-esteem.
- Students are more apt to attend school if their parents are allowed to choose the school based on the students' needs, abilities, and interests.
- Research is mixed on the effectiveness of alternative schools in helping reduce dropout rates of at-risk children. However, studies from Dallas and New York City report dramatic improvements in attendance and earning academic credits.

In Successful Alternative School Programs:

- Students volunteer for, are not coerced into, the programs.
- Staff members come from a diversity of backgrounds.
- Students trust the program and staff.
- Staff members have autonomy to tailor programs to student needs.
- Counseling services are provided as part of the program.
- Learning is by doing, with curricula linked to jobs and careers.
- Students are challenged academically with a highly targeted curricula.
- Students are involved in school governance and classroom activities.
- Standards, rules, and regulations are clear.
- Counselors work with students and parents to help youngsters manage everything from pregnancy to legal problems.

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"It's foolish for teachers to fret over the curious question of whether to 'fail' a student in grade one or two. Some children develop more slowly than others, and whether a student is in first grade or second grade is inconsequential. What is important is not age, but each child's linguistic progress."
(Boyer, 1987, p. 5)

OVERAGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS

Research Finding:

The practice of holding students back a grade because of poor academic performance significantly and dramatically increases the chances that those students will become dropouts. Furthermore, retention may not result in increased academic performance.

- Overage-for-grade students, even if they are reading at higher levels than their chronological peers, are 7 to 10 percent more likely to drop out of school. The blow to student self-esteem caused by school retention policies appears to be so severe as to cancel the positive effects of improved reading skills.
- Two factors can predict a high school's dropout rate: the number of overage-for-grade students it enrolls and the number of entering freshman reading below grade level. Retention alone does not help at-risk students make significant academic gains.
- At least one source indicates that the chances that a student who is held back twice will become a dropout is 100 percent. Other estimates range around 70 percent.

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ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES TO RETENTION

Research Finding:

> *Since some at-risk students develop more slowly than others, whether or not a student is in the first grade or second grade is inconsequential. What is important is each child's linguistic progress. Carefully monitoring the academic and social progress of children is the best way to make sure students receive suitable services throughout their years in school.*

- The alternative to retention is not simply "social promotion." With the advent of computerized tracking systems, educators can reduce the emphasis on what grade level a particular student should be in. They can also increase the emphasis on identifying and enhancing that student's abilities in each of the multiple dimensions of measurable performance and intelligence. To the extent that educators can accomplish these tasks, the term "retention" will no longer be appropriate for educational systems.

- No computerized tracking system works unless someone decides what information it must contain, enters accurate data, and uses it. Superintendents must also stress the need to build assurances of confidentiality into any computer monitoring system.

- There is a concern that reporting requirements will place considerable strain on current data management systems, and that substantial computer reprogramming will be required. As a result, many districts have made major commitments to the development of microcomputer database management systems.

- Tests are useful in providing a barometer of how well schools are doing, but tests by themselves do not come close enough to assessing individual children or providing teachers with sufficient information to alter practice (Boyer, 1987, p. 6).

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ATTENDANCE, TRUANCY, AND DISCIPLINE CONCERNS

Research Finding:

Students who drop out often have had attendance problems beginning in elementary school. Schools may have several policies which can contribute to poor attendance. At least 45 percent of all students who drop out have either been suspended or designated as behavior problems by their teachers.

- Attendance standards are a major concern to urban school districts because a child who is not in class cannot develop the skills required for academic success.
- When a student regularly cuts one class or fails to show up for the entire day, this should alert educators that he or she might not view the school as a friendly place to learn and socialize.
- When students are asked to leave school, they are deprived of time for instruction. This time deprivation further distances them from the school.
- Some at-risk students enroll late in the year, attend several different schools, and attend classes less regularly than their peers.

Policies and Practices That Contribute To Poor Attendance Include:

- Failure to inform parents of nonattendance.
- Failure to acknowledge a student's return to school after a prolonged absence. Returning youngsters often find that no one helps them reenter.
- Inappropriate suspension policies for truant or tardy students. These policies often fail to improve attendance because they do not address the reasons why students are absent. Tardiness is often a symptom of alienation, and turning tardy students away can increase this problem.

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STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE/DISCIPLINE

Research Finding:

The best attendance and discipline policies are preventive. Suspension for truancy or other problems seems to be counter-productive if the goal is to reduce student dropout rates.

- Students who drop out may have had attendance problems beginning in elementary school. Therefore, policies to monitor and improve attendance are central to many urban schools' dropout prevention plans. A growing number of people, organizations, and institutions are developing joint strategies to hold students in school until they graduate. Many of their efforts greatly enhance the chance for at-risk students to stay in school.

Successful Attendance and Discipline Policies:

- Are district-wide policies that encourage good behavior and clearly communicate the rules to all students.
- Enforce the rules consistently throughout the district and administer fair punishment.
- Establish conferences with the student and his or her parents. This is particularly important because the conferences improve communication with families, a critical first step to changing student behavior.
- Involve "time out," in-school suspension, and truancy centers, accompanied by intensive counseling.
- Utilitize truancy officers, truancy prevention committees, and policemen on duty to apprehend truant students and transport them to the nearest center to be counseled by a staff social worker.
- Conduct parent and community meetings or publish newsletters.
- Schedule law enforcement visitations on each campus.
- Include teacher involvement and notification of absence, with immediate follow-up on student absences.
- Utilize electronic home telephone calling programs, to help reach out to families of truant and chronically tardy children without great expense to the school. Evidence suggests that these programs lead to attendance improvements.

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CONCERNS ABOUT STUDENTS' HOME ENVIRONMENTS

Research Finding:

Next to academic problems, students identify family problems most often as the reason why they dropped out of school. Students from single parent homes drop out more often than those with both parents present in the home. Poverty is the most overwhelming demographic predictor of who will drop out.

Students Who Drop Out Are Likely To Come From:

- Urban areas rather than from rural settings.
- Single parent households rather than from two parent households.
- Families who don't monitor student activities and achievement, rather than families who are involved with their children's activities.
- Families where parents don't have a high school diploma.
- Large rather than small families.
- Racial and ethnic minority groups.

Frequently, many disadvantaged racial and ethnic minority students have difficulties coping with family distress and crumbling inner city communities. They also may be placed in classes for the learning disabled. Black students are more than three times as likely to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded as are Anglo students, but only half as likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented. Students who are misdiagnosed as learning disabled often come to accept the school's judgment that they are misfits. They blame themselves for their inability to function.

Low socioeconomic status, particularly when coupled with ethnic/racial minority group status, is a strong predictor of dropping out. Of the minority groups, Hispanics have the highest dropout rate, followed by Blacks, then Anglos. Hispanics drop out at almost twice the rate for Blacks.

By the time Hispanics reach high school some 25 percent are two or more years overage for grade level. It is estimated that 40 percent of all Hispanics who drop out do so before reaching the spring semester of 10th grade. Among Hispanics who graduate, 10 percent or more are overage for grade.

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STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Research Finding:

Involving parents early, preferably in preschool, is crucial to keeping students in school.

Consistently, reports are positive from educational programs which have involved the parents and guardians of at-risk children in the programs. Student attendance is higher than district averages, and more students are promoted.

Schools Can Promote Parental Involvement By:

- Scheduling telephone or personal conferences before or after work.
- Offering classes to teach illiterate parents to read.
- Using electronic telephone calling systems to let parents know when their children are absent.
- Requiring counselors to contact parents after their children have been absent for several consecutive days.
- Meeting individually with parents of students on the verge of leaving school.
- Supplying parents with home-learning materials.
- Offering parent education workshops on such topics as child development, health education, or using community resources.
- Keeping parents informed by sending home newsletters and bulletins.
- Requiring students and their guardians to sign a contract indicating they intend to meet the goals of their local program. Students must agree to attend school each day, and parents must help them get to school on time.
- Encouraging economically disadvantaged parents to go on school-arranged field trips because many have never been out of their communities.
- Teaching parents ways to help their children learn at home.
- Encouraging parents who lack a high school diploma to enroll in a GED program.

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DELINQUENCY CONCERNS

Research Finding:

Misbehavior in school can identify a potential dropout. Students who have been suspended, are chronically truant, or have been in conflict with the law, have a higher-than-average chance of dropping out.

- Unsatisfactory experiences with school authority systems are commonly cited as reasons why individuals drop out of school.
- When students perceive academic performance standards as unattainable, they are likely to disengage from school. Precursors of dropping out or evidence of disengagement include apathy, participation in negative activities and absenteeism.
- School experiences are a major bellwether of the decision to drop out. Poor academic performance, truancy, and in-school delinquency are all strong predictors of early school departure. Expulsion and suspension are additional indicators.
- 41 percent of those who drop out report previous disciplinary problems, compared to 16 percent of their peers who stayed in school.
- The most often cited reason for dropping out, after pregnancy, failing grades and boredom, is suspension or expulsion.

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STRATEGIES TO ASSIST STUDENTS WITH DELINQUENCY PROBLEMS

Research Finding:

> *Delinquent nonachievers can and will learn, but not from the analytical, lecture-and-recitation type of teaching found in many classrooms. They need global, tactual-kinesthetic experiences -- high interest activities that seem real, require movement, and involve working with others.*

- One criteria for successful programs is the applicant's willingness to be candid about why he or she is in trouble with the school and to admit that a change in attitude and behavior is necessary for future success.
- These students must commit themselves to a set of rules, work expectations, and standards of behavior.
- Learning style tests show 43 percent of all students who drop out have fair to poor auditory capability and 53 percent have fair to poor visual capability. However, 88 percent have strong tactual abilities, and 99 percent have strong kinesthetic abilities.

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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Research Finding:

The extent to which practitioners understand their own as well as others' cultures impinges directly on the effectiveness of instructional programs. The key to improving success for students from different cultures is modifying the means used to achieve learning outcomes, not in changing the intended outcomes themselves.

- As different social systems interact, cultural rules of conduct often come into conflict. Many instructional procedures used by schools stem from cultural values, orientations, and perceptions that may differ radically from those of ethnic or racial minority students.
- Practitioners should not use home environment or social status as an excuse for poor achievement. Rather, it is important to understand the real impact of the school system, classroom environment and one's own teaching activities on students. At this point, educators can create classroom environments and school learning climates that promote high achievement.

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EMPLOYMENT CONCERNS

Research Finding:

The level of employment among adolescents is high. Many students who drop out of school to work do so because they find work more enjoyable and important than school. Others quit school because they need to support a family.

- Increased time demands on working students may also create potential dropouts. Many dropouts take on the attitudes and roles of adults while still in high school. A central role that defines adulthood is employment. Time spent working is time taken away from studying, both in and out of school.
- Employed high school students spend less time on homework than full time students. They also skip school more often and receive lower grades.
- 25 percent of all 14 year olds and 50 percent of 17 year olds in a 1979 study were employed at least part-time. Anglos were employed more frequently than Blacks or Hispanics.
- More than one quarter of the male dropouts in the High School and Beyond Study chose to work rather than continue their education.

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STRATEGIES TO COMPENSATE FOR THE NEED OR DESIRE TO WORK

Research Finding:

Isolated work experience programs have little value in increasing the employability of dropouts. At-risk students who need to work should work, but the experience from the work sites should be used as pedagogical reinforcement to a classroom component that is clearly connected to the job.

- There is no clear indication that vocational approaches are directly effective in reducing dropout rates. There is evidence, however, that the more successful vocational programs result in a decrease in suspensions and increased academic achievement.
- Work-related approaches should attempt to reach the potential dropout who sees little relevance in school work and cannot readily transfer what is learned in school to life outside the school.
- Research indicates that the Job Corps, Comprehensive Education Training Act (CETA), Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Youth Conservation Corps, Work Study Programs, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Work Incentive Programs, Youth Opportunity Centers, or Community Action Programs have not resulted in mass reductions of unemployment among youths or in dramatic changes in their economic status. Expansion of existing youth services is advocated to provide compensatory education to overcome environmentally and culturally derived deficits, along with career and job development, including work-study programs and on-the-job training.
- For many years, researchers have discussed whether the inducement of a part-time job would bring dropouts back to school and encourage them to continue until they graduated. The research on this idea is not promising. When remediation and real skills training are added to the original model, the findings are more positive.

Programs That Successfully Meet a Student's Need or Desire to Work:

- Include an academic component, but the curriculum should relate to functional skills needed in the workplace.
- Assure that students learn to read before they acquire vocational skills.
- Construct learning environments that do not resemble a traditional classroom.
- Assure that the individuality of each student is reflected in the teaching technology utilized.
- Prepare at-risk youth for the labor market through pre-employment/work-maturity services -- but not until they are genuinely ready to conduct a job search.

- Are to some degree intensive. There must be sufficient "time-on-task."
- Have established and clearly communicated rules.
- Have clearly communicated performance standards.
- Have caring and "approachable" teachers.
- Provide counseling services to help students with school, personal, and job problems.

In programs for the"marginal high school student," Wehlage (1983) emphasizes the importance and effectiveness of an "experiential curriculum," which may involve students in political/social action, community study, or the production of goods or services. Boyer (1983) urges expansion of activities that allow high school students to do something genuinely and immediately useful for other people. Such activities are sometimes sponsored by the schools themselves.

There are other strategies, such as extending the school day, that make it easier for youth to maintain employment while keeping pace with their academic programs. A job or pregnancy can make attendance during the regular school day difficult. To provide students with more opportunities to earn a diploma, some districts provide evening, after school, or weekend classes.

"If we are to reorder national education priorities, we also must adjust the school schedule to changing family and work patterns. When today's school calendar was set almost a century ago, with nine months of study and three months off, over 90 percent of all school-age children were living on a farm with two parents, working hard, and staying home in the summer to tend the crops. Today, less than 3 percent of today's families live on farms. In most households both parents work away from home" (Boyer, 1987, p. 5).

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY CONCERNS

Research Finding:

> *Students who have limited English proficiency are much more likely to drop out of school than students with proficient English language skills. The dropout rates of language minority students such as Hispanics and American Indians are among the highest in American society. 45 percent of all Mexican American and Puerto Rican students who enter high school never finish, compared with 17 percent of non-Hispanic white students.*

National estimates of the number of children from families with a limited proficiency in English range from 1.2 to 1.7 million. About 60 percent of these individuals are also from low-income households. A recent U.S. Department of Education publication, Schools That Work: Educating Disadvantaged Children, notes that language deficiencies may delay academic progress. For example, Hispanic students score far below non-Hispanic Anglo students in reading achievement. The National Assessment of Educational Progress recently found that only 44 percent of Hispanic nine year-olds demonstrated basic reading proficiency, compared with 72 percent of non-Hispanic white students.

However, language is not always a contributing factor. For example, many Hispanic dropouts were born in the U.S. and speak English very well. In fact, a new study done by the Dallas Independent School District shows that Hispanic students whose first language was Spanish are more likely to remain in school than those Hispanic students whose first language was English. The problem of retention and its relationship to dropping out of school is compounded by the fact that parents of English-speaking Hispanic dropouts may not speak English themselves. For these parents, the school system may appear overwhelming.

Low educational attainment of parents, combined with mostly foreign language usage at home, puts some students at a disadvantage in school in terms of proficiency in English as well as general verbal competence, unless the school provides a generous dose of English and foreign language instruction.

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STRATEGIES TO COMPENSATE FOR LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Research Finding:

Evaluations show that the implementation of programs for non-English speaking students can also serve to reduce the dropout rate.

- Dallas ISD's High Intensity Language Training (HILT) students receive intensive language instruction in English. Dallas ISD has found that the attrition rate of students enrolled in the HILT program has decreased substantially.
- School personnel must respect the cultures of non-English speaking students, but these children must also learn English as quickly as possible. Some researchers indicate that this may be accomplished by immersing these youngsters in an English-speaking environment.

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SELF-ESTEEM AND SOCIAL INTERACTION CONCERNS

Research Finding:

School dropouts are generally not lacking in friends at the time of school departure. However, it appears that having close friends who had dropped out of school was a factor in the decision of the students who leave school prematurely. Potential dropouts often have little opportunity or incentive to fulfill their need for self-esteem or status through school activities.

- Research indicates that one-third of the students who dropped out of school had one or two close friends, and slightly more that one-half of them had three or more such friends. One-eighth of the students had no close friends at the time of dropping out.
- Survey research suggests that the two major peer-related causes for dropping out of school were that the friends of the respondents were dropping out, and the respondents were unable to get along with other students.
- Most potential dropouts are capable of handling school work, but have become defeated learners -- stymied by lack of self-confidence, problems at home, or an academic setting that's too fragmented or worse, indifferent to how students learn.
- Before dropping out of school, many at-risk students demonstrate low self-esteem and a sense of having lost control of their futures. They perceive that teachers do not have much interest in them.
- Students' low expectations of receiving either good schooling or good grades often account for dropping out.
- The motivation to avoid pregnancy is weakened by academic failure in school. Students with serious basic skills deficiencies often have encountered failure so frequently that their self-esteem in nonacademic areas generally lags behind that of their peers.

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STRATEGIES TO ASSIST STUDENTS WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM

Research Finding:

> *Few educators are in a better position to affect the lives of students than teachers, who mold attitudes towards school and play a powerful role in what students learn. Students need teachers who respect and support them, and who maintain high expectations. Teachers of at-risk students must be especially committed to each of these individuals. They should also be able to counsel students. Counseling works best when a student is willing. Voluntary participation in counseling achieves positive results, mandatory participation doesn't.*

- The most successful teachers enable a potential dropout's natural desire for learning to flourish. Districts should regularly provide in-service training in how to work with at-risk populations. This training should be appropriate for teachers with varying skills, experience, and work situations. Teachers should help design the training sessions so that they are closely tied to a school's instructional program and environment.
- There is an overwhelming need for many teachers to develop an improved level of sensitivity toward students' emotional as well as academic needs.
- Ordering a potential dropout to participate in counseling may lead to resistance. Associating counseling with discipline or punishment may seriously damage the possible effectiveness of the approach.

Some Goals for Counseling Include Helping a Student To:

- Define meaningful goals.
- Increase understanding of personal interests, abilities, and aptitudes.
- Increase understanding of personal values and beliefs.
- Improve skills for identifying and evaluating opportunities.
- Increase skills and self-confidence in problem-solving and decision-making.
- Take reasonable risks, some responsibility for their own problems or mistakes, and learn from them.
- Increase sensitivity to the needs of others and improve skills to help others satisfy their needs.
- Improve communication skills -- especially the ability to appropriately convey feelings.
- Improve interpersonal skills in order to deal with authority figures in a mature manner.

- Develop and maintain personal behavioral limits.
- Gain knowledge and skills for coping with physical and emotional change.
- Improve skills for assuming adult roles.

A good counseling relationship is based on trust. Establishing trust can be a difficult task when working with potential dropouts, who may have learned to not trust adults in general, and are especially wary of school personnel. One option includes selecting counseling group leaders who are not associated with the school.

A counseling group leader needs to recognize his or her limitations and be willing to seek qualified help or make referrals whenever necessary.

In addition to basic counseling skills, a counseling group leader must also have a secure understanding of group dynamics, group methods, and group goals. Unless carefully led, a small group can be damaging and unproductive.

Advisement and mentoring approaches encourage students and staff to relate to each other on a personal, rather than an institutional, basis. This may help develop a more supportive and caring atmosphere in the school.

Principals can help assure that at-risk students receive adequate personal attention. Students who drop out often complain that they left because the principal and teachers weren't interested in them. In the best schools, teachers go out of their way to make all students feel welcome and to serve as mentors.

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CONCERNS ABOUT YOUTH WHO ARE PREGNANT, MARRIED, OR WHO ARE PARENTS

Research Finding:

Pregnancy is the most common reason that females leave school. Three-fourths of single mothers under the age of 25 live in poverty. 60 percent of women heading households on welfare first received assistance as teenage mothers.

- Teenage mothers and fathers leave school far more often than adolescents who are not parents.
- Of the female students leaving school, two-thirds cite pregnancy as the main reason. Nationally, 80 percent of pregnant and married teens drop out. Almost a million adolescent females -- one in ten -- get pregnant every year in this country.
- Pregnancy is the most frequent reason young women cite for dropping out of school. They quickly learn that a diminished education also leads to decreased economic opportunities.

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STRATEGIES TO HELP STUDENTS WHO ARE PREGNANT, MARRIED, OR WHO ARE PARENTS

Research Finding:

Most teenage parents who drop out of school because of pregnancy indicate a willingness and desire to continue with their school work, and would do so if some way to care for their children were provided.

- In Detroit, 71 percent of the pregnant females who dropped out of school said in a survey that they would return if free child care were provided.
- Increasingly, schools will be called upon to provide prekindergarten sessions to care for young children who need care outside the home.
- Schools should work with community agencies in providing in-home assistance for first-time, low-income parents of high-risk infants.

Reference

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GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS

There are several characteristics that are common to programs that have been found to be successful in working with at-risk students and dropouts. Many of these characteristics are also associated with the effective schools research. Most of them can be used as guidelines to improve instruction for all children.

Successful Programs:

- Are voluntary in nature.
- Give teachers autonomy over program planning, membership, and evaluation.
- Are small in size and local in scope.
- Establish and maintain strong linkages between school and family.
- Are characterized by a caring and attentive staff who are attuned to the personal needs (social, academic, and cultural) of students.
- Stress academic growth, and develop and deliver relevant curriculum which combines both academic and vocational components.
- Are individualized around the particular needs of a school and of the students who participate in its programs.
- Have faculty who establish high expectations for their students and establish specific timelines and goals for student performance.
- Often serve to extend the traditional services provided by schools to meet the particular needs of non-traditional families and the work schedule of adolescents.
- Establish a different climate from that which typifies many mainstream educational programs.
- Establish strong linkages between schools and businesses.

COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, 1973 EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; AND VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED IN 1974.

It is the policy of the Texas Education Agency to comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all federal and state laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency makes positive efforts to employ and advance in employment all protected groups.

Texas Education Agency
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April 1989

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